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AUTHOR Oromaner, Mark
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ABSTRACT

Although college students may provide the data for many studies of educational institutions, the viewpoint of students is often excluded from the interpretation of these data. The social scientists and educational researchers who examine colleges and universities are adult/professionals and more likely to identify with other adult/professionals than with students. This identification may result in a biased view of students and educational institutions. Awareness of this bias/perspective and insight into its origins may permit researchers to make students a more central part of their interpretations and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of colleges and universities. A solution to this problem has been proposed by a group of sociologists collectively referred to as the underdog school of sociology. Within this framework, students can be viewed as underdogs in educational institutions. In order to present the underdog view, it may be necessary to use participant observation and to include students in all phases of research, including conceptualization, design, analysis, and interpretation. This more radical proposal may be necessary if the inherently partisan, but essential, view of students is to be taken into account in the understanding of colleges and universities. (EJV)

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Bringing Students In: The Advantage of a Partisan View

Mark Oromaner

Executive Vice President
Hudson County Community College
901 Bergen Avenue
Jersey City, N.J. 07306

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Bringing Students In: The Advantage of a Partisan View

Abstract

It is suggested that as a result of similarities in age, educational backgrounds, and work experiences, educational researchers are more likely to identify with adult/professionals (administrators, staff, professors) than with students. This identification may result in a biased view of students and educational institutions. In order to redress the present imbalance of studies in favor of the partisan view of the professional, studies presenting the equally partisan view of students should be conducted. This is likely to involve the utilization of participant observation and the inclusion of students in various phases of research.

Although college students may provide the data for many studies of educational instututions, the viewpoint of students is often excluded from the interpretation of these data. Harold Silver (1983:230-231), writing from an historical perspective, has concluded that, "... the history of universities is very often a history without students, except as statistics."

The basic argument in this paper is that social scientists and educational researchers who examine colleges and universitites are adult/professionals and therefore usually identify with other adult/professionals, e.g., administrators, professors, staff. At the same time, they are not likely to identify with students or to take students' perspectives into account. A specific example has been provided in a review of a recent publication concerned with literacy and the open-access college. Rockhill (1985:73) suggests that although the authors purport to present all aspects of the picture and the book is strong in data, "... their vantage point is an administrative one, their view from the top, not the bottom. The authors' lack of attention to students and indifference to their plight results in a very biased picture...."

These comments have applicability beyond the book under review. Awareness of this bias/perspective, and insight into its origins may permit researchers to bring students into their interpretations and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of colleges and universities.

The sociology of knowledge, from Karl Marx's emphasis on the social determination of consciousness to Robert Merton's structural analysis of the role of Insiders and Outsiders (1972), provides a number of theoretical orientations for the development of such an understanding.

A sociology of knowledge analysis close to concerns of this study is C. Wright Mills's research on the theoretical, methodological, and political orientations presented in textbooks in the field of social disorganization. He found similar orientations in various texts and explained this on the basis of the social characteristics of the authors. Mills's (1943:167) hypothesis was:

> If members of an academic profession are recruited from similar contexts and if their backgrounds and careers are relatively similar, there is a tendency for them to be uniformly set for some common perspective. The common conditions of their profession often seem more important in this connection than similarity of extraction.

Individual and group biases or perspectives are to be explained not on the basis of conscious distortions or conspiracies, but rather on the basis of the fact that common educational and work experiences lead to common viewpoints.

Etzioni (1960:277) has made the observation that there is likely to be a similarity between researchers and professionals in terms of "... education, income, social prestige, age, language, manners, and other characteristics." This in turn, he suggests (Etzioni, 1960:278), leads to a "... natural sympathy for the professional orientation in professional organizations." In the case of colleges and universities, this natural sympathy leads to an identification with faculty and/or administrative viewpoints and a neglect of student viewpoints.

Either explicitly or implicitly, commentators who approach colleges and universities must take into account the existence of numerous participating subgroups, both external and internal. Not all subgroups are equally important for each issue; however, once the existence of multiple groups is recognized, one encounters the issue of multiple perspectives. In the words of Howard Becker (1973:172): "Since there are generally several categories of participants in any social organization or process, we must choose between the viewpoint of one or another of these groups or the viewpoint of an outside observer." It is likely that researchers are Insiders in the sense that they are affiliated with the college community in general or with the particular institution under study, and therefore it is difficult for them to take the view of an Outsider (Merton, 1972; Oromaner, 1984).

Institutions of higher education are service organizations in which professionals (faculty, staff) provide a service for their clients (students). Professions,

in turn, are occupations that are distinguished, in part, by (a) a body of theoretical knowledge (expertise), (b) practitioners who have autonomy in the performance of their work (autonomy), and (c) practitioners who have a service orientation (altruism) (Haug and Sussman, 1969). Occupations possess these characteristics in varying degrees; we are not dealing with a dichotomous (professional/nonprofessional) situation. The important point for this discussion is that the term professional does capture the idea that researchers and a number of the adult groups within educational institutions have similar occupational backgrounds, status, interests, and views.

The interaction of professional expertise, altruism, and autonomy frequently leads to a kind of arrogance in which the professional believes that he/she must be the active partner in the relationship and the client the passive partner. The professional defines the problem for the client and then informs the latter of the most appropriate way of approaching the problem. For example, although students (clients) are viewed as the prime beneficiaries of colleges and most universities, the faculty, staff and administration (professionals) often assume that they must be in a position to define what is in the best interest of students.

The contradiction or dilemma of service organizations has been identified by Blau and Scott (1962:52):

> Since one group in service organizations must decide what is in the best interest

> of another, the basic problems here are to assure that the former serve the interest of the latter but that they do not let the latter determine how they are to be served.

If we fail to bring students into our analyses and interpretations, we will not know whether they believe that their interests are being served, or what consequences flow from the fact that someone else has defined these interests.

During the 1960's and 1970's students and other clients made their dissatisfaction with professional control quite evident (Haug and Sussman, 1969). However, the relative conformity of students in the 1980's should not be taken to indicate that professional control has no impact on them. The phenomenon of student conformity should be of equal interest to researchers as is the phenomenon of student protest. If one were to start with the assumption that students are active beings and that they have often been thwarted in their attempts to play an active role in colleges and universities, one might search for acts of rebellion, innovation, ritualism, and retreatism (Merton, 1957:131-160) as well as secondary adjustments (Goffman, 1961:173-320). The problem of order is as real as is the problem of disorder. One reason why student conformity has received less attention than student protest is that professionals within colleges and universities are less likely to define it as a problem. In 1968, when Grayson Kirk, president of Columbia University, found that student demonstrators had left his office in disarray, he was quoted as having asked:

"My God, how could human beings do a thing like this?" In contrast, for Erving Goffman (1971:288 n44): "The great sociological question, of course, is not how could it be that human beings would do a thing like this, but rather how is it that human beings do this sort of thing so rarely?" That is, conformity demands explanation. Goffman's specific question is: "How come persons in authority have been so overwhelmingly successful in conning those beneath them into keeping the hell out of their offices?"

From a tradition based on the ideas of theorists somewhat outside the mainstream of academic sociology (Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, and John Dewey), Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) criticize those who view schools purely in terms of social/cultural reproduction, and argue for the importance of the development of a theory of resistance. In their words:

> By downplaying the importance of human agency and the notion of resistance, reproduction theories offer little hope for challenging and changing the repressive features of schooling. By ignoring the contradictions and struggles that exist in schools, these theories not only dissolve human agency, they unknowingly provide a rationale for <u>not</u> examining teachers and students in concrete school settings. Thus, they miss the opportunity to determine

> whether there is a substantial difference between the existence of various structural and ideological modes of domination and their actual unfolding and effects (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985:71).

In a similar manner, the work of a number of more mainstream academic sociologists provides good grounds for rejecting what Wrong (1961) has referred to as the oversocialized conception of man. Wheeler (1966:577) has made the point that unlike inanimate objects, people may choose to go along with a program or to fight it. Goffman (1961) has shown that even in total institutions, e.g., asylums, hospitals, prisons, boarding schools, humans do fight back and find ways of surviving and "making out." Moreover, if one views the situation from the perspective of the client, the "making out" becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal activity. Alvin Gouldner (1970:403) developed a critique of the conception of the passive student, and has pointed to the partisan and limited nature of the view that all influence travels a one-way path from professors to students:

> Yet from the standpoint of the most elementary precepts of sociological analysis, which do, indeed, insist on the importance of a measure of mutuality and reciprocity as intrinsic to the

> nature of any social relationship, such a one-way image of faculty "transmission" to passive, recipient students must be regarded as marvelously wrong-headed - particularly when held by sociologists.

Weis (1985: 558) has presented ethnographic data on the culture of an urban community college, and documents her position that, "(t)he form and content of the curriculum is in large part the result of ongoing interaction between faculty and students at the level of their own culture."

A solution to the problem of bias/perspective has been proposed by sociologists collectively referred to as the underdog school of sociology. Howard Becker and Erving Goffman are the two most prominent representatives of this school. In reference to mental patients, Goffman (1961:x) argues that we need partisan studies from the point of view of the patient "since almost all professional literature on mental patients is written from the point of view of the psychiatrist, and he, socially speaking, is on the other side." The idea of redressing the imbalance of studies away from the point of view of the overdog is echoed by Becker (1973:174) who argues that since the view of conventional society toward deviance is usually well known, we ought to study the view of those who participate in deviant activities.

Within this framework, students can be viewed as underdogs in educational institutions. In order to present the underdog view, it may be necessary to use participant observation and to include students in all phases of our research. In the process of data collection for her community college study, Weis (1985:553) attended classes, conducted interviews with faculty and students, and "... in general, immersed myself in the institution for a full academic year. While my identity was not hidden, I essentially assumed the role of 'student'." Although participant observation is quite common, and students are included as subjects in data collection, we should go beyond this to include students in the conceptualization, design, analysis, and interpretation of our studies. This more radical proposal may be necessary if the inherently partisan, but essential, view of students is to be taken into account in our understanding of colleges and universities.

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